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ABSTRACT

In most of the Arab world, the development of a national education system has been a recent process. Currently, one out of every two Arabs can neither read nor write. This paper focuses on how illiteracy has been dealt with in the country of Iraq. A 1947 survey put total illiteracy of those 15 years and older at 89.1%. In the period following the 1958 revolution, it was increasingly viewed as the responsibility of the government to expand education and to eradicate illiteracy. The education system was expanded and the growth was too rapid. The result was a deterioration of quality, and illiteracy continued to be widespread. The period since the revolution of July 17, 1968, marked a new era in the campaign against illiteracy. After several ineffectual efforts, the leading party (BASP) in 1978 launched the National Comprehensive Campaign for Literacy, making the eradication of illiteracy a national issue. By 1980 the campaign claimed 1,588,997 citizens had become literate. This figure represents 76.4 % of the 2.3 million target population of 15-45 year-olds. Real gains have been made, yet, in spite of the campaign's figures, it is still too soon to evaluate the program in terms of achieving a high degree of adult literacy. A list of 15 references is included. (DB)

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THE HISTORY OF THE MARCH TOWARD LITERACY IN IRAQ

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INTRODUCTION

Different models and approaches were used by many countries in their march toward universal literacy. Their degrees of success varied as much as the differences in condition, history, and culture. This article details the desire, the struggle, and the persistence of the various Iraqi regimes toward uniformed literacy. The lesson becomes clear that success in achieving univeral literacy in any country is an arduous task.

EDUCATION IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Educational development in Iraq may best be understood within the historical framework of education both in Iraq itself, and in the broader context of the Arab world. Until the advent of western influence in the 19th century, education in Iraq, as elsewhere in the Middle East, was dominated by the Islamic tradition of religious and classical learning. Traditional education was offered to young children (almost exclusively boys) in mosque schools (kittab) by local religious leaders. Instruction centered on the memorization of the Koran, reading and writing receiving only secondary emphasis. The prestige attached to such religious learning was reflected in the strong pressure put on even the poorest village or urban dweller to see that his son acquired at least some formal knowledge of the Koran. From the 13th century on, the only lower preparatory training was either private-tutorial or that offered under local religious auspices, and only a very few were given the opportunity to master the rudiments of literacy. Higher levels of learning were available

only to a small minority, and were concerned largely with Islamic theology and the mastery of classical Arabic. Thus, formal learning was reserved for the priviledged few attending the "learning circles" (halqat) of the mosque schools. The Christian and Jewish minorities maintained their own schools with a comparable emphasis on religious training. According to Christopher Lucas (1981), "provision of instruction on anything approaching a mass popular basis had to await the emergence of post-colonialist nation states in the present century and the beginnings of national education systems" (p. 74).

In most of the Arab world, the development of expanded formal schooling networks has been a more recent, post-independence process and, in many countries, has had to accommodate rapidly expanding populations. Currently, one out of every two Arab adults can neither read nor write. According to the 1980 UNESCO figures, in most Arab states among those age 15 or older, it was estimated that 73% (60% for males and 85.7% among females) were illiterate. This figure represented an improvement over the 81.1% rate of 10 years earlier when it had been estimated that 71.6% of all males and 90.7% of all females were illiterate (UNESCO, 1980). However, during that decade, the absolute number of adult illiterates had increased, especially among women (Al-Zubaidy, 1980).

The situation was a little better with respect to younger Arabs. The literacy rate among those age 10 and older in the eight Arab countries supplying the data averaged no more than 42% (31% for males and 52% for females) (Arab Literacy and Adult

Education Organization, 1975). This improved situation reflects concerted efforts by such nations as Iraq and Saudi Arabia to improve their school systems. However, in most Arab states compulsory schooling laws were difficult to implement because of inadequate facilities and expanding populations.

According to Kedda (1976) the absorption rate of primary schools in the Arab nations studied in 1974 did not exceed 66% on the average. For school-age males, the participation rate ranged from 70% to nearly 100%, with an average of 78%. For females age 10 and under, the initial school attendence rates ranged from a low of 29% to a high of almost 100%, but averaged no more than 47%. Moreover, it was estimated that the overall enrollment rate had actually fallen between 1971-1974 by some 23%, a loss attributable partly to expanding population pressure on overcrowded school facilities.

The school enrollment attrition rate in most Arab countries amounted to as much as 50% in 1974. Of the 66% of the school-age population enrolled in school in the early 1970's, it was estimated that half of them would drop out before obtaining any certificates. Accordingly, one-third of the school-age population could be expected to complete the primary level, one-third would attend no school, and one-third would drop out before completing the primary level. Regarding this situation, Lucas (1981) concludes: "Clearly, without massive intervention on an unprecedented scale, it appears inevitable that illiteracy will continue to impede the Arab quest for regional development and modernization" (p. 76).

THE CASE OF IRAQ

The Early Period

The present discussion focuses on the national literacy program in Iraq, which had its beginnings in 1927 with the establishment of a special unit in the Ministry of Education. During the period 1921-1958, Britain transformed Iraq into a focus of a political and military force, i.e., the "Baghdad Pact,"against Egypt and the rest of the independent Arab countries. This effort met with little success in the face of the wishes of the various tribal, religious, and ethnic groups that made up the population of Iraq (Peretz, 1963). An upsurge of patriotic awareness and subsequent activities had forced the British to allow the establishment of evening classes for illiterate citizens. These classes were a blend of traditional and functional education and were held in school buildings and public places (Supreme Council for Compulsory Literacy, 1980). During the same period, the traditional kittab began to give way to the primary school (Sousa, p. 101). The decade of the 1950s saw an increasing expansion in the number of school places available. Despite this, only a small percentage of all school-age children were served (Penrose [1978] estimates this as less than one quarter, p. 155), and the overall rate of illiteracy was estimated at approximately 90%. A 1947 survey put total illiteracy of those 15 years and older at 89.1%. A decade later this figure had been reduced by less than 5% (UNESCO, Literacy 1969-1971).

Educational development had received new emphasis in 1952 when the Directorate of Fundamental Education and Anti-Illiteracy

was established. Simultaneously, UNESCO officially declared the start of a literacy program in Iraq. Evening literacy classes were held five days a week throughout the year. However, attendance was not complusory and the programs suffered from poor enrollment and attendance rates. According to the 1957 census, only 1.3% of the illiterate adults in the 15-45 age group enrolled in this program. According to the official body, "Since the adults of the 15-45 age group form the real manpower of any society, more than two-thirds of the manpower Iraq needs in its national development process were dissipated by illiteracy and ignorance" (Supreme Council on the Comprehensive National Campaign for Compulsory Education, Baghdad, 1980, p. 1). Although the Education Act of 1940 made education compulsory, according to the SCCNCCL, "it had never been put into practice because of the lack of serious endeavor and keeness on the part of the monarchial regime." (p. 2)

1958-1968

The 1958 revolution had changed Iraq from a monarchy to a republic. In the period following the 1958 revolution, it was increasingly viewed as the responsibility of the government to expand education and to eradicate illiteracy. Measures were taken to make primary education compulsory and to broaden educational opportunities at all levels (Khadduri, 1969, p. 29). The budget for the Ministry of Education was increased substantially, and the number of school places expanded rapidly. The number of pupils admitted to primary school increased from 430,000 in 1957-58 to 921,000 in 1965 (Sousa, p. 101). Furthermore, by 1963 a

network of literacy centers for men and women had been set up throughout the country (Sousa, p. 101). In 1965 the government set up a National Literacy Committee to oversee efforts in this area. However, the rapid expansion of the education system inevitably resulted in a deterioration in quality, and illiteracy continued to be widespread. High dropout rates and lack of trained teachers contributed to the failure of the literacy programs. Between 1957 and 1965, studies revealed that the number of illiterates in the 15-45 age group had increased by 59% over the 1957 figure. In 1965, it was estimated that 56% of the population was illiterate (Sousa, 1982, p. 101). Thus, while the years before 1968 had served to focus attention on the problem of illiteracy, the measures taken during this time were not sufficient to achieve any significant level of success.

Post-July, 1968

The period since the revolution of July 17, 1968, marked a new era in the campaign against illiteracy and has been characterized by the mobilization of government support and resources to this end. The leading party (BASP) referred to the problem of illiteracy in 1963 in the report of the Sixth National Congress (Sousa, 1982, p. 102). The party believed literacy to be the foundation for social change and development as well as a prerequisite for the elimination of backwardness and exploitation. The report of the Party's Eighth Regional Congress held in January, 1974, contained the statement:

> The illiteracy of vast sections of the population, especially in rural areas, is one of the most formidable obstacles to the political, economic, and social progress

> of the country. As long as illiteracy rates remain high, it will be impossible to raise the standards of the people or to build a progressive society capable of tackling the complex problems of our era. (pp. 167-168)

At its eighth Regional Congress in January 1974, the BASP had conceded that the gains in literacy had been grossly inadequate. The official report issued by the Congress acknowledged that the non-compulsory aspect of primary education in Iraq was an obstacle to reducing illiteracy. It was therefore concluded that primary schooling should be compulsory in Iraq. In 1974 a Free Education Law was passed under which the government undertook to pay all education costs from kindergarten through university level.

As a result of determined government effort, the number of primary schools increased during the first 10 years after 1968 by 71%; secondary schools by 83%, and universities, by 19%. The number of students enrolled in primary schools increased by 107%; those in secondary school, by 83%; and those at the universities, by 110% (Al-Zubaidy, 1987).

The period since 1968 has also seen the mounting of a government-wide campaign against illiteracy. Literacy Law 153 of 1971 provided for the formation of a Supreme Literacy Board whose function was to carry out the literacy campaign. In 1973, the Board issued a national plan for the eradication of illiteracy. At that time it was estimated that 40% of the males and 76% of the females in the 15-45 age group were illiterate.

The 1974 program, based on the national plan developed the previous year, concentrated on reading, writing, and arithmetic,

and on vocational training. Primers were prepared for workers, farmers, soldiers, and women. Separate classes were established for peasants and trade union members. In order to lend full government suport to the effort, literacy was made a condition for employment in government positions. However, low enrollment and high dropout rates continued to be major problems. Illiteracy remained a major obstacle to national development despite the improvements made.

By 1976 it was evident to the government that its overall development plans were being plagued by basic infrastructure weaknesses. Particularly critical was the lack of a skilled and trained workforce. It was clear that in order to avoid dependence on foreign labor, Iraq would have to train its own technicians and experts which were so badly needed for national development. Later that year (1976) the Council for Compulsory Education and Adult Education was established for the purpose of improving literacy among the nation's post school-age population. Its members were drawn from a wide range of ministries and organizations and it was empowered to mobilize all sectors of society in the literacy effort (Sousa, p. 103). The movement reflected the spirit of a full-scale military offensive. Most importantly, enabling legislation was passed in 1976 to implement Article 27 of the 1970 Interim Constitution calling for free, universal, and compulsory primary schooling (Directorate General of Educational Planning, Baghdad, 1977). To become effective in 1978, Public Law 118 (enacted in 1976) mandated free compulsory education for all 6- to 15-year olds. The law covered a six-

year primary school and a three-year intermediate level of secondary education. During the interim period, preparatory measures were taken for implementation, including preparing textbooks, building schools, and preparing teachers in crash courses. In May 1978, the National Comprehensive Campaign for Literacy was launched by the BASP, making the eradication of illiteracy a national issue to which all the country's energies on both official and popular levels would be oriented. The President of the Republic was the Supreme Chairman of the Campaign, clearly an indication of the seriousness of the effort. Regular attendance at literacy classes was compulsory for all illiterate citizens. Punitive measures were taken against those who failed to comply with the law.

The target population were the almost two and a quarter million (2,212,626) illiterates in the 15-45 age group, or about 18% of the total population of Iraq. The number of female illiterates was over twice that of males (1,535,936 vs. 676,690). This represented approximately 50% of the entire 15-45 age group in the country, a situation of some urgency in view of the country's increasing need for trained and educated manpower.

An intensive publicity campaign was waged for the purpose of familiarizing the public with the objectives and seriousness of the campaign. In addition to radio and TV broadcasts, exhibitions, songs, and fairs were employed to dramatize the battle against ignorance. By December 1978, over 1,300,000 illiterates had reported to the literacy training centers, 62% more than the anticipated 833,000. At that time there were more than 14,000

centers; one year later this figure had nearly doubled. By the end of the first year of the campaign (which was initially planned to last for three years but which was later reduced to two), the enrollment in the training centers rose to over 2 million, leaving only about 155,000 illiterates not absorbed into the program.

The Literacy Campaign was developed around five basic objectives: (1) to teach reading, writing, and arithmetic; (2) to develop professional skills; (3) to endow illiterates with improved cultural, economic, and social standards of living; (4) to enhance patriotic and national consciousness among illiterates; and (5) to promote interest in continuing the educational process thereafter (The Battles of Letters in Iraq, p. 23).

For the basic level, there are two textbooks: a primer and an arithmetic book, along with a teaching guide to help teachers in their task. The books are written in both Arabic and Kurdish to accommodate the local language in the Kurdish region in northern Iraq. For the complementary level ("Takmil"), there are five textbooks: an arithmetic book and four readers (for workers, farmers, soldiers, and women, respectively). Texts and materials are geared to the needs and environments of each particular group of learners. In addition to books, special teaching aids are provided, such as audiovisual materials in the form of flash cards, posters, charts, videotaped lessons, broadcasts on national television, and special cassettes for drivers and seamen.

The program utilized all available schools and public buildings such as mosques, halls, and local administration facilities. Classes were also held aboard ships for seamen. Special nurseries were provided during class hours at female literacy centers to care for the students' children. Literacy teachers were recruited from among primary school teachers, governmental department officials, and university graduates; and special training courses were held for administrative personnel and for literacy teachers.

Graduates of literacy centers were eligible to enter "popular schools," created in 1980, which prepared those graduates who wished to do so, to enter an evening secondary school. The official six years required to complete the primary school curriculum was reduced for mature students, making it possible to enroll in a secondary school after only 37 months at the primary level.

By September 1980, Iraq had entered a new era, as illiteracy was well on its way to extinction. According to the latest figures listed by the coordinator of the campaign in Al-Thawra daily newspaper, Iraq managed to free 1,588,997 citizens from the burden of illiteracy. This figure represents 76.4% of the 2.3 million involved (Sayala, 1983, p. 3).

ANALYSIS OF THE CASES OF IRAQ

Any attempt to analyze the literacy campaign in Iraq and to identify the reasons for its success must take into account the fact that the strategies used were tailor-made to Iraq's unique

environment. The Iraqi campaign adapted a number of techniques used by other countries in their literacy programs, modifying them to suit its own unique purposes. It did not, for example, rely primarily on volunteers for teachers as had been the casein Cuba (Morales, 1981). Teachers were recruited from regular school personnel, since voluntary/revolutionary zeal was recognized to be a poor substitute for effective teaching of the kind most likely to be found in an experienced professional teacher.

Literacy programs in other parts of the world had often relied on non-formal learning networks; however, a more systematic approach seemed necessary in Iraq in order to make full use of all available resources and to reach the entire population of illiterates. Formal classes and a system of school-based instruction were instituted. The program made use of an educational infrastructure already established, namely, the local schools then existing in most towns and villages. Thus, the instruction took place in schools already in operation. In some instances it was necessary to set up learning centers in factories, army barracks, or at other work sites.

Administrative Structure

There was no attempt to exclude the state's official school bureaucracy. The existing educational administrative apparatus was involved directly. The National Literacy Law of 1978 required that the Supreme Council for Compulsory Literacy be chaired by the Minister of Education. Other members of the Council included the deputy minister, ranking officials from other ministries (higher education, planning, defense, and

information and culture), trade federation representatives, party officials, and delegates from student groups and other mass organizations. This step insured broad representation by all segments of society.

The Supreme Council itself is made up of a general policy-making body, with specific executive functions delegated to a smaller secretariat-general within the council. The Supreme Council is connected to a network of regional literacy councils or committees functioning in each of Iraq's 18 provincial governorates. These agencies carry out council directives, adapt policy to local needs, and monitor progress in their provinces. What has emerged is a complex, hierarchical decision-making structure, highly centralized at the top, but with relative flexibility at lower levels to permit a needed degree of local autonomy and initiative (The Battle of Letters in Iraq, p. 81).

The campaign has relied on peer pressure and official exhortation to gain compliance with the National Literacy Law. The Law provides for punitive measures for those who fail to abide by it. According to Lucas (1981):

> Anyone failing to register after official notification to do so may be fined. Should a person not appear within a 3-day interval following the start of classes, he or she is liable for a second fine. An individual's outright refusal to attend classes carries the threat of a week's custody in confinement. Repeated absence from class also constitutes a legal offense punishable by jail sentence. (p. 76)

Objectives Achieved

In addition to the so-called "three Rs", the curriculum of the literacy classes emphasizes political awareness, especially

of the achievements and aspirations of the BASP, national unity, revolutionary struggle, and the kinship of all the Arab people. Economic goals involve the concept of dignity and utility of labor, modernization of industry and agriculture, and individual duty to produce more efficiently and consume more rationally. Social objectives encompass familial duties, community welfare, productive leisure, and appreciation of the aesthetic and spiritual values of the Arabic-Islamic heritage.

Classes were staggered in order to allow attendance during off-work periods. Each class met for two hours daily, five days a week, for a total of ten hours including study periods. Although the quality of instruction varied depending on the individual teacher's ability and experience, the overall level of competence seemed adequate. Classes often were informal in nature, with a good deal of discussion among participants. Methods of instruction were flexible, with both phonetic and "whole word" or "sight recognition" methods being utilized regularly to help the students absorb the alphabet and subtleties of Arabic calligraphy. Particularly helpful were the evening television broadcasts which served to supplement the regular classes for the primary (base-stage) learners.

Lucas (1981) feels that the students were serious in purpose and exhibited a sense of pride and accomplishment, that those attending literacy centers felt they were thereby contributing much to the welfare and betterment of society and themselves, e.g., many women became more marriageable.

Although attendence at the learning centers was indeed quite high, the government's assertion that illiteracy in Iraq has been all but eliminated by the end of 1980 needs to be carefully evaluated. Four years is scarcely enough time for a nation to move from about 50% illiteracy to almost total literacy, even if only the relevant and teachable age group are considered. A more objective measurement is needed concerning the degree of literacy achieved. According to figures recently released, the campaign success rate was 76.4%. Considering the size and complexity of the task coupled with the unfortunate intervention of an extended war, even if a modicum of literacy has been achieved for the majority of the population, a giant step forward has been taken.

SUMMARY

A number of striking features may be noted with reference to the Iraqi literacy movement. First, its intensity and speed might very well be something of a milestone in the literature of literacy drives. The literacy campaign truely became a national priority, and nearly one in six of the nation's population has been touched by it. As was personally observed by Al-Zubaidy (1980), there is an ongoing evaluation of the program, and feedback from this process is used to amend and improve the instruction provided. Periodic conferences are held for such purposes. Another impressive feature is the combined use of public media and the existing education system on behalf of a common goal. The campaign is characterized by its deep sense of purpose and coherence rising out of the ideological foundations

rooted in nationalism and Arab/Islamic unity. Furthermore, the campaign focused on cultural as well as alphabetical literacy and literacy campaign teaching materials were developed to inculcate "modern" values and behavior patterns as well as to develop basic literacy skills. If this strategy is successful in raising the social and cultural level of the lower classes, it will be, as Sousa (1982, p. 106) points out, one of the most significant accomplishments of the literacy campaign.

It is still too soon to evaluate the program in terms of achieving a high degree of adult literacy. A person recorded as having passed a test may still not be fully literate in the meaningful sense of the word. Nor can one rule out some degree of inaccurate recording by provincial officials or administrators in order to enhance their performance. However, gains are real, and hundreds of thousands of former illiterates have indeed acquired crucial basic learning skills, while many others have gone beyond this point. Whatever their attainments, they will surely form a solid base from which to educate those who follow them.

Once basic literacy has been achieved, the next step is the enhancement of the public schools designed to train native talents to take over the various positions vital to the nation's economic welfare. According to the figures published in the Iraq daily newspaper in June 1984, the number of graduates from these schools amounted to over a half a million (560,346). Of those,

473,679 were female and 86,666 were male. Self-sufficiency will thereby be furthered considerably by such progress.

Other Arab states are not as fortunate as Iraq in having oil reserves capable of financing an ambitious literacy drive. Nevertheless, Iraq is an example of what can be accomplished through resolve, commitment, leadership, and realistic planning, ingredients even more important than financial means. Indeed, other experience in using education to promote national development goals clearly show that "adequate finance alone is not a panacea, even in the short term" (Presley, 1984, p. 68).

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